DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 308 UD 029 076

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TITLE Needed: Minorities in Educational R&D.
INSTITUTION Council for Educational Development and Research, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Blacks; Cultural Pluralism; Educational Environment; Educational Research; *Educational Researchers; Elementary Secondary Education; Equal Education; *Equal Opportunities (Jobs); Experimenter Characteristics; *Minority Groups; Personal Narratives; Recruitment; *Research and Development; Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS African Americans

ABSTRACT

"This paper addresses the need to open opportunities in educational research so that more minority researchers can contribute their personal experiences and acquired expertise to the development of excellent, equitable, and effective school programs and practices for all children. It captures the perspectives of a young minority (African American) educational researcher as he tries to reconcile his language, culture, and values with the assumptions of a system driven by research and development results that in his view hold a very narrow definition of 'truth.' As the researcher melds personal insight with the theoretical knowledge acquired through formal education, he gains a more holistic view of the strengths and weaknesses of children's learning environments. This in turn allows him to focus on research with an understanding of the diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic richness children bring to school in a way that many other researchers cannot." The paper concludes by arguing that there must be more federal involvement in programs designed to increase minority participation in practical educational research and development in the form of minority scholarships, fellowships, internships, post-doctoral fellowships, and early career research grants. (Contains 10 references.) (JB)

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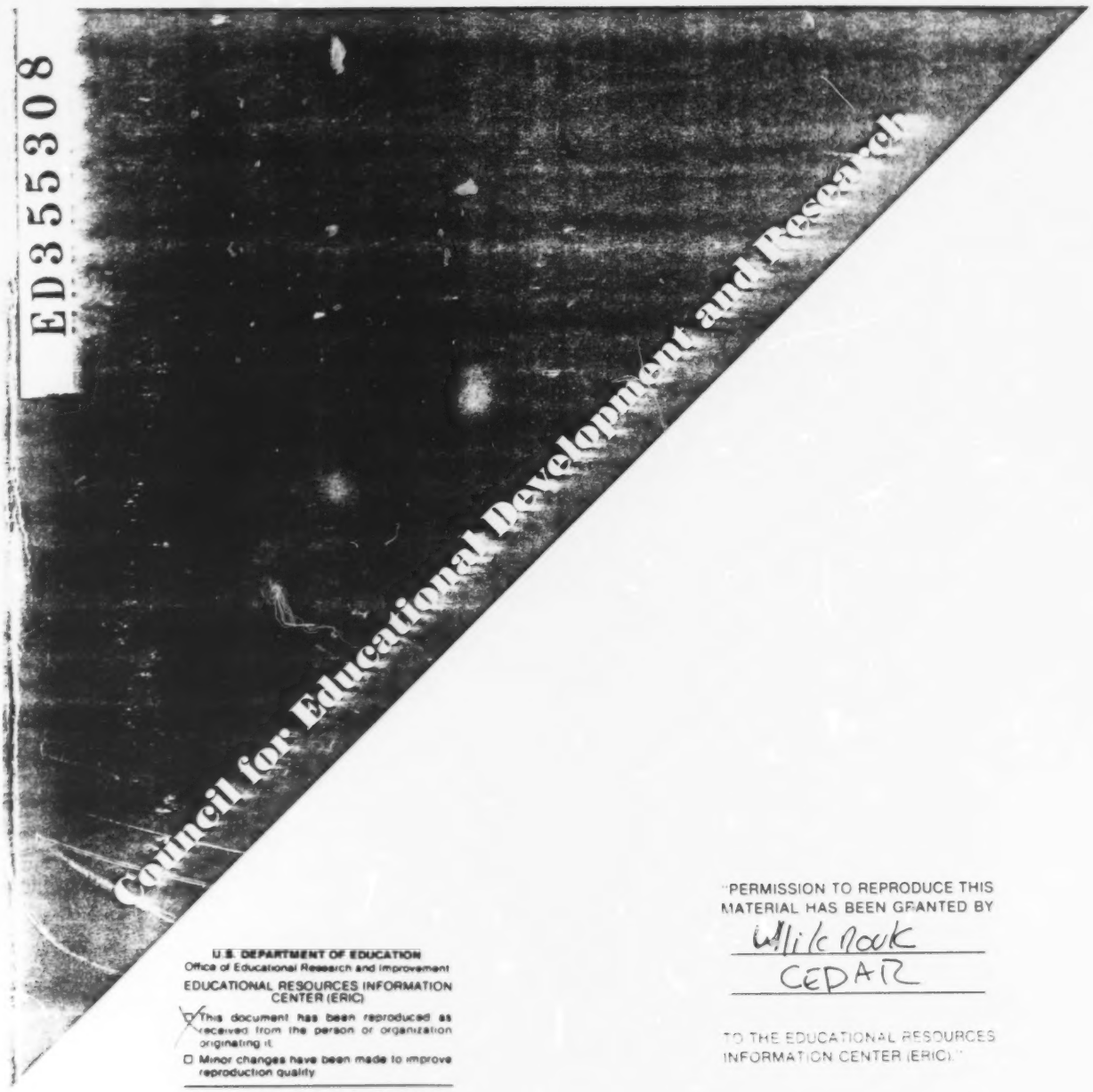

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Council for Educational Development and Research

NEEDED: MINORITIES In Educational R&D

By Stanley C. Trent

Preface

Cultural diversity is the hallmark of this nation. The Council for Educational Development and Research believes that for educational research and development (R&D) to be a tool with which to seek high academic performance for all children, it must reflect that diversity.

The kinds of questions research asks, the perspectives from which it draws its conclusions, and, yes, the people it employs, should address the needs of our entire nation. Only the very broadest lens can hope to focus educational attention on all the children America must teach.

This paper, by Stanley C. Trent of the University of Virginia, addresses the need to open opportunities so that more minority researchers can contribute their personal experiences and acquired expertise to the development of excellent, equitable, and effective school programs and practices for all children.

It captures the perspectives of a young minority educational researcher as he tries to reconcile his language, culture, and values with the assumptions of a system driven by research and development results that, in his view, hold a very narrow definition of "truth." As Trent melds personal insight with the theoretical knowledge he has acquired through formal education, he gains a far more holistic view of some of the strengths and weaknesses in children's learning environments. This, in turn, allows him to focus his research with an understanding of the diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic richness children bring to school in a way that many other researchers can not.

There is a great deal to gain from looking at teaching and learning research from a multi-cultural perspective. Yet, minority researchers are absent from our educational R&D system. The profession badly needs their insights. As Trent tells us, these researchers can be the "gate keepers and analysts" to keep other researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who are pursuing school reform for under-achieving poor and minority children on course.

To achieve this nation's educational goals, we must mobilize the full ethnic and cultural diversity of America's energy, experience, and intellect.

Needed: Minorities in Educational R&D

Anglo-American educators and researchers have developed methods, models, and practices that reflect their cultures, life experiences, and world views. So, too, must a greater number of minority researchers do that.

I am an American educator of African descent. At the time of this writing, I am entering my final year as a doctoral student in special education. I have worked as a research assistant and have studied the principles of educational research and evaluation extensively in my coursework. I have been exposed to issues regarding the appropriateness and efficacy of instructional programs designed to teach children with disabilities, minority children, and children who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and I have learned a great deal about the development and implementation of educational policies designed to meet the needs of these children.

As I reflect on my experiences, I have come to understand the process of educating children with learning problems from a more holistic perspective. I am now aware of the myriad of factors that interact and influence the research agendas, policies, and practices in

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compensatory and special education. Armed with this knowledge, I am excited about and anxious to begin my career as a teacher educator and educational researcher.

Still, my studies have left me frustrated and torn between what I have learned as a doctoral student and what I have experienced as an African-American all of my life. I am torn between the propositional, theoretical knowledge I now possess and the tacit understandings about my own cultural experiences within the black community.

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Now, as I face the threshold of a new career, it appears that my life long interactions and experiences as an African-American have connected with my newly acquired research skills and have prompted me to formulate questions — possible research questions — about learning and achievement among children with disabilities, children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and children of color (a disproportionate number of whom are both poor and educationally disabled) that are quite different from the questions that frame and define research at my university.

Even though I recognize the immense value of what I have learned as a doctoral student, I am constantly reminded by memories of my life experiences that culture influences what we believe and how we know. In examining publications by other minority educators who have already established themselves as exceptional teacher educators and researchers, I find that we share similar views and frustrations.

In a most provocative article, L.D. Delpit tells of her struggles as a black educator in teaching preservice teachers to use a process-oriented versus a

skills-oriented approach to reading and writing. Even though she became a proponent of process-oriented approaches as a result of her teacher training program, she soon learned through her own experiences and interactions with veteran black teachers that black students who are poor and educationally disabled need skills-oriented instruction as well if they are to learn to read and write. In her soul-stirring, passionate reflection, Delpit tells of her frustrations as she struggled with the conflict between the philosophy of her training and her own life experiences:

> Could I have been a pawn, somehow, in some kind of perverse plot against black success? What did those black nuns from my childhood and those black teachers from the school in which I taught understand that my "education" had hidden from me? Had I abrogated my responsibility to teach all of the "skills" my black students were unlikely to get at home or in a more "unstructured" environment? Painful thoughts. (p. 382)

I attended a southern black segregated elementary school that enjoyed an outstanding reputation. I remember the commitment and dedication that characterized many of the African-American teachers who taught me to reach for the stars, that I was capable of becoming whatever in this life I desired and aspired to become. By virtue of their ethnicity and their life experiences, they possessed a keen sense of awareness about those aspects of our culture, our language, and our behavior that had to be honored and incorporated into our learning experiences.

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I remember the Christmas plays and the school-closing productions that were part of the culture in segregated, African-American schools. There were students from each grade level who were selected for a most coveted and sought after "speaking part," and the plays or musicals were carefully selected by teachers so that each classroom would be responsible for some phase of the productions. Based on their strengths, some students were selected to design and construct the sets, some were selected to assist the music teacher with instrumental selection, and some were assigned to sing in the school chorus. Still others were selected to develop and perform choreography for the dance segments. Finally, I remember how the entire student body would meet periodically to go through the entire production and then, within their classrooms, teachers allocated time for us to practice our individual or class parts.

Through this very process-oriented approach, we learned leadership skills, we learned to present before large audiences, we learned to work cooperatively to achieve long-term goals, and we learned to identify and appreciate the strengths that each of us brought to the situation.

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From an instructional frame of reference, I also remember characteristics and practices that distinguished many of my African-American teachers from the Anglo-American teachers I had when our school system was finally integrated. I recall how my African-American teachers never adopted the latest trend in wholesale fashion (e.g., language experience, programmed reading), but systematically used a combination of approaches to teach academic skills. They used direct instruction to introduce and teach new skills, but they almost

always used hands-on, experiential learning strategies to reinforce and add meaning to the skills being taught.

Music, drama, and art — all intricate components of African-American culture — were woven into our instruction to reinforce learning in all subject areas. I vividly remember the culminating activity for our study of South America in fifth grade. We presented a play to parents, faculty, and the rest of the student body. We dressed in native clothing, we choreographed and performed native dances, and we sang popular songs from various South American countries. As we shared a small piece of culture from these countries with the audience, a narrator supplied information about each country's history, government, climate, and people. I remember the papier-mâché and sawdust maps that we made to illustrate anything from population density to typography of the different countries. And yes, the dioramas, the beautiful dioramas that we constructed as projects added much meaning and relevance to the lectures and the readings assigned in class. Subsequently, when I became a teacher, I used these same strategies to teach children with learning disabilities and I encouraged the use of programs that incorporated direct instruction, process approaches, and hands-on experiences while I functioned as an administrator.

Another example of my experience relates to my upbringing in the black Baptist church — an experience shared by many African-Americans irrespective of their educational, professional, or socio-economic status. On youth Sunday at the church I now attend, I am always mesmerized by the performance of our youth choir. Dressed in royal purple robes, these young people open the worship experience with a

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processional that is usually comprised of an emotion-packed medley of contemporary gospel selections and Negro spirituals. Their synchronized, rocking motions create a majestic aura as they move gracefully through the aisles of the sanctuary into the choir loft and combine their singing with choreographic interpretations that serve to intensify the essence of the message to be gleaned from their renditions. The call-response pattern found in African-American music and language is embedded in each selection and as the choir sings, members in the congregation find themselves rocking and swaying in sync with the performers, waving their hands, tapping their feet, and shouting affirmations such as, "Sing yo' song, child!", "Glory!", and "Say so!". On Monday mornings, these students return to classrooms that in most cases do not reflect the influence of their familial, community, and social experiences.

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I am sure that many educators and researchers consider this focus on the qualitative and affective aspects of African-American culture to be frivolous, speculative, and irrelevant to the education of African-American children. However, sometimes when I recall a strategy used by one of my teachers or as I sit through a church service or an electrifying theatrical performance, I find myself wondering how an instructional program in reading, mathematics, science, and/or social studies that incorporates and captures aspects of black culture would influence the achievement of these students. I wonder how programs and curricula that combine direct instruction, cooperative learning, experiential learning, and the arts in ways similar to how my teachers taught would affect what and how much these students learn and retain.

I have an intuitive hunch that such models would positively affect the achievement of many African-American and other students who now achieve poorly in school. However, while I believe that we must be careful not to use research on cognition and culture to develop and perpetuate racial stereotypes, I am convinced that it is now time that researchers in education begin to move beyond speculation and explore the affects of sociocultural variables on student achievement.

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Reinforcement for my beliefs has come partly from the writings of other minority researchers and educators — people who share my experiences and have worked to construct theoretical frameworks for studying learning from a cultural perspective. J.E. Hale–Benson (1986) synthesized research findings on how culture shapes cognition based on the work of many researchers and theorists (e.g. Abrahams, 1970; Cohen, 1969; Levine, 1977).

These individuals have described the African-American child in a similar manner; most African-American children are relational versus analytical learners; they are highly affective; and they are global, holistic learners — to these students, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. African-American students are differentiated as being emotional learners and their language is characterized by strong, colorful, metaphoric expressions. Meanings are derived through context, they are more inductive than deductive, and they are community-oriented versus individualistic and competitive.

While Hale–Benson uses psychological, sociological, and anthropological literature to provide possible explanations for how African-American children

learn, she also concludes that, to date, much of the work done in this area is inconclusive, to wit:

> This book should be regarded also as a statement of a problem — a working paper. It is not a finished, data-based theory. It is not a curriculum or a "how-to-teach-black-children kit." It is a progress report. It is an attempt to share the analysis of presently existing research literature that may create a framework for such a theory. (p.5)

In reviewing the research literature on African-American cognitive patterns, B.J. Shade (1989) formulated conclusions similar to those of Hale-Benson. Shade examined literature on sensory modality preference, cue selection, information retrieval and recognition, and information analysis and evaluation and found that researchers have reported distinct differences in these areas between African-American and Anglo-American children. Still, like Hale–Benson, Shade is tentative with her findings. She concludes that:

> The evidence that these patterns exist, while sufficient to produce a strong intuitive argument, is really insufficient to produce the types of changes necessary in the teaching–learning process and in the assessment of skills. There is an overwhelming need for a cadre of scholars to examine these issues in the laboratories and in the field in an effort to support these propositions. (p.110)

There is an overwhelming need for a cadre of scholars to examine these issues in the laboratories and in the field in an effort to support these propositions.

I am convinced that more minority educators must be encouraged to move into the ranks of educational researchers and must be supported so that culturally-based instructional programs can be developed that extend beyond the compensatory and remedial programs now considered to be the answer for underachieving children of color. These researchers must be given the opportunity to contribute to the pool of knowledge that will dictate and shape what policies and practices must be developed and implemented to serve an extremely diverse population of students.

Black educational researchers will greatly enhance the quality of instruction for black students who are economically disadvantaged and educationally disabled. These researchers can focus on their own experiences in relationship to these students in ways that other researchers are unable to do. They can play a key role in the development of preservice and inservice programs designed to prepare preservice and inservice teachers — mostly white, middle-class, female teachers — to better understand the culture and cognitive styles of black children and other children of color who are currently failing in school. These researchers will become gate keepers and analysts to carefully scrutinize, criticize, and lend advice to other researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who are attempting to advocate for reform in school organization, curriculum, and instruction for underachieving minority children.

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We know that, "by the year 2000, minority groups will represent a majority of elementary and secondary schools' student populations in more than 50 major cities" (Frierson, 1990). Despite our attempts

to move beyond the cultural deficit model, we know that a disproportionate number of minority children are economically disadvantaged, and that many of these students perform substantially below white children in reading and writing (Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989). We know that black children are three times as likely as white children to be placed in classes for students who are educably mentally retarded (National Black Child Development Institute, 1986). We know that "minority and female students continue to be noticeably absent from academic educational programs in schools across the country and underrepresented in careers in the humanities, social sciences, mathematics, science and technology" (National Education Association, 1990).

The time is here to establish opportunities that will allow more minority researchers to translate their intuitive conceptions into research-based models that will bring about positive differences in the appropriateness of education for significant numbers of these children. As Delpit states:

> It is time to look closely at elements of our educational system, particularly those elements we consider progressive; time to see whether there is minority involvement and support, and if not, to ask why; time to reassess what we are doing in public schools and universities to include other voices, other experiences; time to seek diversity in our educational movements that we talk about seeking in our classrooms ... The key is to understand the variety of meanings

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available for any human interaction, and not to assume that the voices of the majority speak for all. (p.385)

To accomplish this goal there must be more federal involvement in programs designed to increase minority participation in practical educational research and development. At a minimum, such involvement must take the form of:

- minority scholarships,
- fellowships,
- internships,
- post-doctoral fellowships, and
- early career research grants.

Programs must be created that will allow minority school personnel who are involved with children to become more active in research and development at the school level.

Programs must be created that will allow minority school personnel who are involved with children to become more active in research and development at the school level. Now, more than ever, there is a crucial need for radical educational reform. This change can only be effective if individuals with different perspectives and experiences are afforded the opportunity to contribute to the development of solutions that are appropriate for and commensurate with our complex, diverse, and critical needs.

I rest my case. ***Let de Church say Amen.***

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